

## Trinity University Digital Commons @ Trinity

---

English Faculty Research

English Department

---

10-1989

# Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World [Review]

Michael Fischer

Trinity University, [mfischer@trinity.edu](mailto:mfischer@trinity.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng_faculty)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (1989). Emerson and skepticism: The cipher of the world [Review of the book *Emerson and skepticism: The cipher of the world*, by J. Michael]. *Philosophy and Literature*, 13(2), 379-381. doi: 10.1353/phl.1989.0040

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

balance between rational demonstration and persuasiveness. Hume, that self-avowed "man of letters," is an obvious case in point and two interesting essays are devoted to texts by him. Donald T. Siebert's is on the manner of the *Treatise* and argues that style and meaning are not neatly separable in that work, for there we see Hume in the *process* of discovering his philosophy. Robert Ginsberg's detailed analysis of the essay "Of the Standard of Taste" shows how Hume's literary strategy there is to cause the reader to experience what the author is talking about.

Mary Wollstonecraft's rhetorical situation was, according to Laurie A. Finke's interpretation, even more intricate. For she was forced to address men on the issue of women's liberation in a language created by men for the oppression of women. On this reading some of her apparent infelicities of style can be explained as part of her challenge to the patriarchal rhetoric of her time. The picture Finke presents of eighteenth-century male philosophers as uniformly elevating reason (masculine) over the passions (feminine) is historically oversimplified; consider Hume's position, for instance. But the general argument is stimulating and helps us better understand Wollstonecraft's achievement.

Kant is not an obvious candidate for literary analysis (though John A. McCarthy's essay cites him as seminal for the development of the philosophical essay as a German genre). However, a fine piece by Stephen F. Barker provides a succinct account of Kant's philosophical project in the first *Critique* and its connection with several aspects of his expository style, including an amusing and illuminating representation of the faculties of the mind as protagonists in a soap opera.

The remaining essays are perhaps not quite so directly connected with the philosophical rhetoric theme, though they too are concerned with philosophical writing *as writing*. Wulf Koepke offers an overview of Herder's career as a search for a language fit for enlightenment; Harry M. Solomon discusses metaphor in Pope's *Essay on Man*, proposing a concept of "regulative metaphor" (analogous to Kant's regulative idea); and Robert Markley locates Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* in its historical stylistic context.

Overall this is an interesting collection which includes several particularly good essays. It should be of relevance not only to those in eighteenth-century studies, but also to anyone concerned with the literary dimension of philosophical writing.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY, NEW ZEALAND

ROY W. PERRETT

***Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World***, by John Michael; xvii & 186 pp. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, \$22.95.

In *Emerson and Skepticism* John Michael argues that even in Emerson's early works his famous self-reliance was more a dream than an achievement. For Michael this dream dates from Emerson's initial quarrel with Unitarianism. In

Emerson's "The Lord's Supper," the skeptical arguments that Unitarians had turned against orthodox Christianity come back to haunt Unitarianism itself. We are presumably left with the autonomous individual, the Emerson who can confidently say to his Unitarian teachers, "This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it" (p. 17). But, as Michael points out, this supposedly self-justified individual still seeks approbation from others. Although freed from the doctrinal constraints that bind a preacher, Emerson as a writer needed an audience. Even as Emerson thus longed for approval, he distrusted the negative reaction he got. But he also worried about his right to censure his critics. In short, Emerson could neither dispense with an audience (and still count himself a writer) nor could he trust his reviewers, whether friends or foes.

Michael shows how this dilemma not only informs Emerson's other early writings, but also accounts for his ambivalence toward Hume, Wordsworth, and Montaigne. No book does a better job of demonstrating how deeply Emerson's "imagination was engaged with what was said about him." Michael does get repetitive, perhaps because he wants to show that Emerson's difficulties with his readers were a constant in his work, not the by-product of any late loss of faith. And Michael can overstate his otherwise carefully presented case, as when he describes Emerson's reluctant discovery that he "must remain at the mercy of the use his readers make of him" (p. 32). Emerson, as Michael elsewhere portrays him, is not so much at the mercy of his readers as in endless conflict with them. Making Emerson the victim of his audience turns an anxious struggle into a rout.

But imagining Emerson at the mercy of his readers does capture the danger that Emerson presumably faces. According to Michael, Emerson experiences interpretation, not to mention judgment, as a threat that he can neither overpower nor avoid. From Emerson's point of view, "interpretation contaminates identity" (p. 127); feeling misread seems the only alternative to being unread. Unable to make himself known or to know others, Emerson, like every other self, remains "opaque and unknowable" (p. 104)—a cipher, a void, a question, an "indecipherable ruin," an "unreadable blank" (p. 104).

Michael derives this conclusion partly from Emerson's discovery, upon reading the journals of Charles (his deceased brother), that his brother was not the happy person he had imagined him to be. Emerson had used Charles to authorize his own optimism; now this support was gone, presumably along with Emerson's confidence in his ability to read people—hence Michael's conclusion that the other, even a friend or brother, "always remains opaque" (p. 103). It seems to me, however, that the journals of Emerson's brother were not opaque or unreadable; if anything, they were all too clear, painfully at odds with Emerson's earlier view. Emerson's dilemma involved not reading Charles but coming to terms with what his reading revealed. Instead of rendering his brother unknowable, the journals revealed more than Emerson wanted to know. Michael

is right to say not only that Emerson here encounters his ineluctable relatedness to others but that this relatedness poses a problem. This insight makes his book a major contribution to Emerson studies. But I would put Emerson's problem differently. As a reader, he struggles not simply with knowing another self but with acknowledging what he already knows. As a writer, he fights not just the anxiety of remaining unknown but his own terror of exposure, his fear of being found out.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

MICHAEL FISCHER

*Social Values and Poetic Acts*, by Jerome J. McGann; xii & 279 pp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, \$27.50.

Literary studies are in a parlous state indeed when a critic as thoughtful and experienced as Jerome McGann can find no greater value in the "four great modes" of criticism he champions—historicism, formalism, deconstruction, and Marxism—than that they "represent, and themselves enact, programmatic goals which simultaneously display their own insufficiencies, alienations, self-contradictions" (p. 114). McGann undoubtedly wishes to give new legitimation to literary studies through his "dialectical" criticism. But, starting with de Mannian, deconstructionist, and Marxist assumptions, and preoccupied with the contemporary shapes assumed by literary-critical issues, he appears to accept the not uncommon notion that poststructuralist (revisionist) theory invalidates all other critical insights. The fact is that Grice, Hirsch, Frege, Graff, Krieger, Pater, and Arnold in particular have quite useful things to say about the relations between texts, reality, and readers with which McGann concerns himself.

McGann reemphasizes his centrally de Mannian assumptions in passages like the following: "De Man shows that every hermeneutic move—whether a local interpretive act performed on a particular passage or a more general set of propositions defining the structure of a method or of a theory—is fated, as it were, to replicate the dialectic of blindness and insight. As the meanings are deployed and the orders set forth, a corresponding network of darkneses begins to grow as well: the fault lines and errors which are the correspondent breeze (or desert simoom) of all we believe to be stable and true" (p. 99). If this passage means that no depiction of or statement about the world can be sufficiently inclusive to encompass the complexity of existence, or that complete and precise transmission of the emotional and intellectual contents of a single mind to another mind is an unattainable goal, it is a simple truism, but if it means that reasonably accurate communication of thoughts, feelings, and in-